

Part 2/1/66

The Capitol's War Over War Plans

By Marquis Childs

IN THE SOMBER drama of the three-hour meeting of congressional leaders at the White House on the bombing issue, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara made the most dramatic presentation. Many present felt that they were re-living moments as grave as the Cuban missile crisis when nuclear war hung in the balance.

McNamara took the key document in the case for resuming bombing of North Vietnam and with his whiz kids in the Pentagon translated it into charts and graphs. That document was the urgent, top-secret message from Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr. With facts and photographs based on aerial reconnaissance Sharp, commander-in-chief in the Pacific, declared that infiltration of men and military materiel in the bombing pause threatened the security of the defenders of South Vietnam.

It was a masterful presentation showing how not just jungle infiltration trails but truck routes from north to south had been re-established. The McNamara graphs put estimates on the volume of men, guns, food and other supplies that had moved south since the bombing was suspended.

THE PRESENTATION was comparable to McNamara's performance on television in the Cuban crisis. That came as the Kennedy Administration wanted to convince the Nation and the world of the reality of the menace to the United States in the presence of inter-continental range missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba. With charts and blown-up photographs, McNamara put on the television screen the full harvest of intelligence.

Several who saw his performance the other evening felt it was a rehearsal for a later television appearance. Even those favoring a continuation of the pause, who are extremely doubtful that bombing of the north over nearly a year caused any real reduction in the rate of infiltration, were impressed by the performance as a performance.

If any single act could have underscored the increasingly vital role McNamara has assumed, this was it. Harried, pushed almost beyond endurance, he occasionally shows the impatience of a man who, having a mind of extraordinary capacity, does not suffer fools gladly. Yet he is faced on Capitol Hill with a revolt that has an ever-broader base. An episode in the small war within

a war early in January shows how the tension between the master of the Pentagon and the committee chairmen bent on holding the purse strings flares up. From the McNamara view on the Pentagon side of the Potomac, the generalissimo of the opposing forces is Rep. L. Mendel Rivers, the silver-maned South Carolinian who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Opposition to closing military bases, to phasing out the manned bomber, every aspect of the attack is believed concentrated in the committee and its hard-working chairman.

McNAMARA got word, which he passed on to the White House, that Rivers was taking top-ranking members of his committee to Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico. Rivers had asked the Defense Department for a plane to fly eight or nine committee members to Ramey early in January ostensibly for a study of installations in Puerto Rico, one of which is to be closed.

But McNamara's staff suspected the objective was to plan strategy for a campaign against the Secretary of Defense. By what no one considers a mere coincidence, the meeting would take place while top Air Force commanders from around the world were holding their annual conference at Ramey. When Gen. John P. McConnell, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, got word of the congressional rally, he postponed the commanders' conference until February. The most articulate opponents of phasing out the manned bomber are Gen. Curtis LeMay, former chief for air, and Gen. Thomas Power, who was strategic air commander at his retirement. McConnell is loyal, but LeMay left behind two-star and three-star generals distinctly unhappy over the passing of the B-52s.

With Rivers went the ranking Democrats on his committee, Philip J. Philbin, Massachusetts, and F. Edward Hebert, Louisiana, and four top Republicans, William H. Bates of Massachusetts, Alvin O'Konski of Wisconsin, William G. Bray of Indiana, and Bob Wilson of California. McNamara appeared before Hebert's subcommittee to read a complicated statement on America's posture with the passing of the B-52. To his dismay, not a question came from the committee.

But if the Secretary is dismayed, Rivers, who has a quick-burning temper, is indignant. This is not the last skirmish in the small war on Capitol Hill.